
MY CELL MATE¹

Pramoedya Ananta Toer

Translated by James T. Siegel

Our cell—mine and one other person's—was a box made out of thick masonry walls cold during the day and hot at night. It was almost over two meters wide and two and a half long. It was twice my height plus a head without a neck. Along one width—the wall that faced out—yawned a four-sided barred opening. Running half a meter from the ceiling² were iron bars; eleven of them. The distance between one bar and the next was only one decimeter. Along the other width—the wall that faced the passageway and the row of other cells—a wooden door five centimeters thick was hung. Doubled by a door of iron bars—weight seventy kilograms. That wooden door had a small window of four square centimeters. Then above this door yawned another barred opening. But it had only seven bars. This then was the new place forced on me and I had to force myself to settle in and live in it.

This cell was too close for me. This I found out quickly when evening roll call was over. 7:30. And we were put into that cell—shut up behind double doors. I sighed. The torture of that close room was not to be borne. And the reason was the farts of my friend there were unbearable. There was no easy way, no practical way to avoid them. Damn!

In the ten and a half hours in the lockup he farted at least fifty times. And the odd thing was, the odor had an original cast. A new kind of torture. I felt doubly imprisoned. The proper consolation was this: singing the song "Lamenting Heart."

¹ This translation is from the collection of stories entitled *Pertjikan Revolusi* [*Splatterings of the Revolution*] (Djakarta: Dinas Penerbitan Balai Pustaka, 1957), written according to H. B. Jassin in his "Introduction" to the volume, between 1947 and the end of 1949 while Pramoedya was a prisoner of the Dutch.

² The word "*langit-langit*," translated as "ceiling" here, means both the "canopy" or "false ceiling" used in ceremonies and the palate of the mouth.

We had been together two weeks, but his chatter was never clear. Each of his words had first to be thought about for some time. Only then could one perhaps understand. But most incomprehensible. When he started speaking his whole body moved. His accent and his language were strange even though he came from an area only sixty kilometers from that cell. And was an Indonesian too. But he couldn't speak Sundanese, Javanese, or Indonesian. He had his own language.

He liked to read Indonesian and English writing on old newspaper wrappings he came across. And this was always accompanied with smiles and rough shakings of the head one after the other. He was able to write his name on the paper of "Phoenix" cigarette packages. When I gave it my attention, it sounded like this: Entjip alias Gagu [mute]. And he was proud of his writing. How could he not be? He was a villager and not all city people can read. He had been taken prisoner several weeks after the military action. In that cell he got a concrete platform three quarters of a meter wide for a bed. I had the floor—a half meter below him. And that cell—I've said it before—was close for two people. And his farts stormed every night. Before that foul air disappeared, through the barred opening, it visited my nose and the song "Lamenting Heart" drifted up, too. The song seemed to penetrate as never before.

I want to speak about my mate. His face was sharp and narrow, the shape of an Arab face. A bald spot stuck out from the midst of his hair like a *bachelor of art*.³ He was tall, his body wrapped in rough firm muscles. Someone meeting him for the first time would certainly think he was at least a cashier who thought too long about sums of money, but if he were to open his mouth and move his hands and body noisily their supposition would vanish. Then there would be a surprise. And their sympathy would be exhausted.

He was full of long stories that were hard or impossible to understand. His language was difficult since it only consisted of six words, "*dja-uuh, tlatot, euweh, paèh, plèr, and eeh*." And all these words were pronounced along with motions of the body, head, and his two hands. Frequently he would smack his lips in between.

As with other prisoners he was considered "*staatsgevaarlijk*" (dangerous to the state). And in the new terminology he was one of the extremists who were prone to "looting and who did not know humanity."

Men captured along with him told me that this Entjip alias Gagu—my cell mate—was beaten half to death when he was taken prisoner. Rifle butts and heavy, red-tanned spiked boots had a part in it. It started this way: a group of soldiers on patrol was surprised by enemy machine gun fire. He was in that area. He was deaf and so he swayed through the dry rice fields, leaping from dike to dike without concern. Defective ears easily deceive people. He was taken prisoner. His appearance, like a *bachelor of art*, was not credible in the countryside. And he was beaten. He made clear his origins in his language which consisted of six words. The blows went on and on. Suspicion can deceive people. Mutes are accused of shamming. He was stomped on. Blood came out of his mouth. Those six words were repeated waveringly. The torture intensified. He made his voice louder. But only his mustache moved. Not the hair of his armpits—his arms were tied. He fainted.

³ In English in the original.

Those who were captured with him also said he was able to drive, he was diligent and could write his name quite well. In his own place he was a champion, not a guerrilla champion, but a dance champion. If people formed a space he was certain to jump into the arena. Whoever took up a defensive posture was sure to be thrown head over heels. He never studied *pentjak*,⁴ they said, but simply did it and always won. He was never married but he had six children.

When I was first put into the cell he yelled—but for him it wasn't yelling but "*tlatot*." He gestured coarsely for me to enter. I kept quiet and contained my astonishment. Slowly I went in. Quickly he wrote his name on an old "Phoenix" cigarette package with a pencil two centimeters long. From then on I was in with him. Since then I have been annoyed by the coarse movements of his arms, by his ever moving mustache and armpit hair and his farts with their original aroma. I heard a story from someone in another cell. He said he had met a lieutenant colonel connected with territorial affairs. That high-ranking officer had told him that everyone locked up as we were had to be interrogated first. That meant, if the story was true, that cell mate of mine would be interrogated too. I couldn't figure out how they would do it. Maybe in the way they were accustomed—with a club.

The first day went slowly, filled with dejection. At meal time he leapt to the corner of the concrete platform and bent over his food till it was gone. Then he gazed at my bowl—an aluminum Indian soldier's plate. If there was anything left on my plate he happily finished it. And the extra bit was also polished off in silence. Then he wiped his mouth on his arm. And the farts which were always noiseless began.

His body was long and powerful. He needed to eat a lot. His muscles were knotted from lack of fat.

About sundown he sat upright on the concrete platform and moved his hands. Usually he looked down, seeing me on the floor. His sharp eyes kept watch over me as his mouth let loose his experiences in his language of six words. And so it went. Off and on he would strike his body and then look up through the barred opening to the sky where stars now began to be scattered.

So it was now too. The sun had disappeared. He made every effort by his dimly visible expressions, as though trying to convey to me a certain posture which had to be taken in these disturbed times. All his words were accompanied by motions and all his motions were followed by his words, "*dja-uuh, tlatot, euweh, paèh, plèr, and eeh*," slowly as though whispered. But for someone whose ears were still all right it was no different from a scream of pain. And the always noiseless but always nauseating farts followed. And by all those motions and noises, it was clear to me he was suggesting that I continue to trust in God no matter how bad the torture. Then he portrayed the body of a woman. His two fists closed in front of him—a pair of breasts. After that he pressed his head awkwardly against the nape of his neck—a hair knot. He shook his head. Finally he traced a complicated figure with his finger and his head stiffened and bent forward as though the brain had been struck by a bullet. It was as though he were instructing, "Don't think of women; you will lose your strength." After that he sat

⁴ A stylized form of wrestling that is almost a dance.

down cross-legged, untangled his feet and with his left foot hammered at the platform, "if you become weak, people will kick you."

I smiled and nodded my head. The electric light came hazily and indirectly into the cell from the barred opening above the cell doors. I attended to all of his motions; it was clear to me he was hot-headed. He couldn't tolerate the least offense.

He was about thirty-six years old; old enough to stay resentful of the torture he had taken. He was strong enough and had sufficient will to pay it back. All of this was told me in extremely limited language to which was added signals, motions of the hands, head, and feet. And it was certain too that revenge would not be carried out with his ill-fated tongue but with his hands whose power was now stored in his strong muscles. It was clear to me that he did not have many desires. Therefore his aims were coherent rather than piecemeal.

He stood up abruptly like a cat colliding with a mouse. He skillfully lowered himself to the floor. His feet, broadening toward the toes so that they were shaped like a trumpet, went back and forth next to my body. He was like someone in a panic. I lay down. He kept on going back and forth. Not less than fifty times. But his hands were clenched into fists. Then he stopped. Took up the *kuda-kuda* position.⁵ Went on again. Screamed excitedly, "*Tlatot, euweh, paèh.*" Then he opened his fists. Faced the concrete platform and arranged his bed.

He leapt up onto it and stood there. I raised myself up and leaned against the wall. My head was lifted up so my eyes were directed toward his face. Without my expecting it, he faced northwest and screamed as loud as an erupting Tommy gun, "*Tlatot, euweh, paèh!*" drawing it out as he held his hands opened alongside his ears. His eyes, in the shadows, were dark and his beard stretched outward. He gazed through the barred opening to the sky which was already strewn with stars.

I did not understand what he intended. His loud voice kept repeating. Slowly the shouting slackened and finally stayed submerged in the throat. Along with the subsiding of the voice, his hands too descended, limp, powerless, like a man surrendering. I started to hear abuse from neighboring cells—words that one gets in groups of men.

He looked at me and nodded. I understood even less of what he intended.

Perhaps he was inviting me to do what he did. But he did not expect an answer. He gazed through the barred opening again. Now and again he opened his hands next to his ears, bent over, crossed his hands over his stomach. His strong, firm body was limp and pliant—surrendering. Then I understood: he was praying. He was praying to his Lord.

As he prayed I asked myself how anyone would have taught this to him. He had been mute since birth—unable to speak and deaf. How was it he imagined the Lord? And what was it he uttered with his mouth which could only utter those six words? And what was the sense contained in his language? I thought this over as I made my bed. Then I lay myself down. The question remained only a question. A question which needed no answer.

⁵ A stance in *pentjak*.

I watched all of this action from below. It was clear to me that he prayed earnestly, surrendering his soul and body to his Lord. I started softly singing again. It didn't disturb his prayer: he was deaf. He was kneeling. Perhaps it was at that time that he imagined his Lord himself whose being was the same as his own: sharp and narrow face, a bald spot in the midst of his hair like a *bachelor of arts*, a powerful body wrapped with firm muscles. And mute!

Viewed from the floor, his prayer was no different from other Muslims since the prayer was inaudible. The difference only became apparent when he spoke too loudly.

He was no longer half naked. He did not have on a *sarong*. he wore military pants—green pants, and black since it was no longer light. His shirt was similar. No different from me. His cap was made from a piece cut from the lowest part of his trouser leg. Just like a soldier relaxing.

After praying he slept. He no longer spoke [gave voice] but his farts which were always noiseless grew worse—with their original aroma. I went on singing softly. For more or less an hour. Suddenly all the hairs on my body bristled. A bizarre voice which seemed as though it could never issue from the windpipe of a human roared beside me. The noise echoed through the entire prison. I stopped singing. Voices were audible from the neighboring cells speaking and cursing. When I looked with my own eyes it was only Si Gagu. He was standing on the concrete platform again—screaming in front of the barred opening to the free world outside. Even mutes long for their freedom. Apparently—like me too—he was puzzled about the reasons he had to be tortured and put in prison. In my case it was because I got a letter with the greeting, "Freedom." And he because he looked like a *bachelor of arts* and besides was mute.

There was only one wave of screaming. Then there was something like an incomprehensible grumbling. Then, without my expecting it, he beat his chest hard. Stopped. Again his behavior changed. He struck the *kuda-kuda*- position, playing *pentjak* by himself. His large feet pounded on the concrete platform. For more than a quarter of an hour. He relaxed, threw himself on the platform, and sat clearing his throat.

I wanted to know what he was doing. It wasn't hard for me to find a way. I smoked. The flare of my match flared up and I glimpsed him shedding tears. He quickly shielded his face from the light. He stretched out obliquely facing the wall. From that moment on I neither saw nor heard him move—until morning. But his farts which were always noiseless raged on without limit. The voices and abuse from the neighboring cells disappeared. The whole prison slept in the calmness of the night.

At 4:30 in the morning I was again awakened by bizarre shrill screams—when their echo disappeared, the voices and abuse from around followed. Just as the night before, he faced the barred opening, the free world, the freedom that is the right of every human. He prayed. After that he again beat his chest and struck the *kuda-kuda*-position. He raised his feet and dashed them down, his fists flying here and there. If he did that on the floor there is no doubt I would be half killed. Then, he slowly, very carefully got down on the floor. He took some water from a butter can he had ready. He rinsed his mouth and washed his face. Very softly, almost inaudibly. Finally he got back on the platform—and faced upwards—to the barred opening, looking at the sky which was becoming pale from the weak rays of the sun.

At that moment I asked: was there any possibility at all he was a [freedom] fighter? Could he possibly grasp propaganda with his deaf ears? Were the gropings of his imperfect senses sufficient? I don't know. Nonetheless the cruelty and torture which people receive is not easy to forget—wherever and whoever.

At six am the cells were unlocked. People went out to bathe and get breakfast in the inner courtyard. Then we faced breakfast in the cell—sitting on the bare floor. He watched me for a long while. Invited me to converse. His hands moved busily picturing a Thompson [submachine gun]. Then he beat his ribs hard. Interspersed with drinking coffee and taking bites of stale bread. His index finger accused the red jelly. His right hand flew to his mouth as though he were catching spit. His neck stretched out. He was beaten with a Thompson till he vomited blood. And all of that was his own fault—he looked like a *bachelor of arts* and was mute.

My intercourse with Entjip alias Gagu went on slowly. There was no satisfactory change. Not in the least. Half a month went by. But one day there was an announcement that some prisoners would be released. This meant: expelled from occupied territory. They could choose. Banten or Jogja. My cell mate was exiled to Banten—a region new to him. My mate got a clean letter of discharge—a newspaper sheet with black letters. On the bottom ran a row of letters which made up a sentence—he made an agreement, was willing to accept and carry it out. This agreement was only written, “agreement”; orally, it meant threat: whosoever returned to territory liberated by soldiers of liberation would be sentenced to three years in prison. And liberated territory included his own territory—his own village and house-yard. What difference did a household make? What difference did a family make? To be freed from prison was already a blessing. People who were released must say thank you. Because those who win are always right.

This time Entjip alias Gagu did not write his name on an old Phoenix packet with, moreover, a short pencil. Instead his name received the honor of being written on a clean sheet of newspaper. Perhaps too it was written by the hand of a white-skinned girl with curled hair. In the lower right corner a signature was imprinted with green ink. He showed me this document proudly. While a new pair of shorts from the Red Cross was squeezed into his left hand. On his left hip hung a new pair of white Bata shoes, a gift from the Social Committee for Political Victims.

A sheet of newspaper with three centimeters of signatures plus a pair of shorts and a pair of white shoes was the price of his eviction—his freedom. He had to assure himself that these goods were as valuable as his rice fields, his house, and his family. He again had the right to see the free world—freedom that is the right of every human.

And since then my body hair has not again been raised by screams. My view has not again been thwarted by noisy hand motions. Or by the *kuda-kuda* position, by *pentjak*, and by noisy stamping. I do not have to ponder the intent of his conversation. And I can sing “Lamenting Heart” till I am content.

When I remember him, I smile a moment and look to the night sky, viewing the completely free world. Nonetheless the smell of his farts with their original aroma has not disappeared. Only now have I realized that it was not Si Gagu farting all the time but gas from the privy which rose into the cell.

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